

# Blogs will win unless newspapers transfer their brand integrity onto the Internet, says ex-NYTimes ombudsman

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WILLIAMSTOWN, Mass., Feb. 13 — Blogs will overcome mainstream media as a source of news unless traditional media organizations successfully transfer the integrity of their brands onto the Internet, the former ombudsman of *The New York Times* says.

Family ownership is the common thread among the three most prestigious newspapers in America, adds [Daniel Okrent](#), the first "public editor" of *The Times*. Okrent was at Williams College tonight for a [public talk](#) after a private dinner with staff of the *Williams Record* student newspaper and invited guests.

"When you own a newspaper yourself, you care about what people think about the paper," said Okrent. ". . . You manage it for posterity and manage it for the public benefit."

Okrent also said poor news coverage allowed the Iraq war to happen, "it's a horrible time financially for newspapers, and the death of print is happening more quickly than he predicted six years ago.

The three best newspapers in America — *The New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* are each controlled via blocks of stocks owned by families, said Okrent. He acknowledged media criticism of *Times* Publisher Arthur Sulzberger, saying everyone at the paper knows he has the job because he is the latest generation of its [family owners](#).

But whatever the management failings of Sulzberger or other family owners, said Okrent, these three papers are managed for posterity and quality rather than another two cents worth of quarterly earnings . . . the family that owns [*The Times*] takes its mission extremely seriously.

**Press coverage lead to war**

In his a 38-minute talk and almost a half hour of questions-and-answers in Griffin Hall, Okrent talked mostly about his experiences at *The Times*, and a bit about the future of newspapers. He said poor press coverage led to the Iraq war, because in a time of war, editors begin to wear epaulettes on their shoulders and *The Times* were not exceptional in jumping on the bandwagon.

In response to a student's question, Okrent said he is fearful about the growth of Internet web blogs because of the difficulty in determining their credibility. He said the future of newspaper organizations lies in their ability to be seen as more reliable than blogs. During his 18-month tenure as *The Times*'s first public editor, Okrent said, he was astonished how many times he heard people declare as accepted fact things they had read on a political blog.

The good news, I think my fingers are crossed is if the responsible, serious members of the so-called mainstream media live up to their own standards, when you see something by okrent.com and nytimes.com you are more likely to trust these guys [nytimes.com] because their brand means accuracy and thoroughness and fairness, said Okrent. As these brands move onto the web, what's essential is that those brand names still mean what they meant or even more. If not, then we will not only have reason to fear these blogs we will be beaten by them.

In his talk or in response to questions from an audience of about 100 people Okrent made these other points:

He summarized the columns he wrote while public editor about alleged reporting and editing failures in the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy and the leadup to the Iraq invasion. He told a questioner: The general rolling over on the part of the American press allowed the war to happen. I do believe that is true, and I think the press is extremely chastened by that. I think we all know how bad it was.

"It's a horrible time for the newspaper industry financially," he said, adding it is less horrible for *The New York Times* because the paper's readership base has broadened way beyond New York City and the paper's management has realized that its future is on the web.

Investigative journalism has declined as a form, because it is frightfully expensive to do, he told another questioner, because it requires detachment of teams of reporters for a year or occasionally two years at a time. There are very few newspapers that can afford to do that . . . and the TV networks don't feel they are rewarded when they do it.

Okrent said he [predicted to an audience](#) of graduate journalism students at Columbia University in 1999 that newspapers and books would fade out during their lifetime. It's happening faster than I thought, he told the Williams crowd. I think that it absolutely is going to happen. He said this is because technological advances will produce something that we can put in our pocket that will feel like a piece of newspaper and will

be receiving digital signals.½ The result, the said, will be savings on ink, paper and delivery that will be ½put in the pocket of the owners, or of readers, or both.½

[Okrent](#), who lives in New York City and on Cape Cod, is beginning a fellowship at the [Joan Shorenstein Center](#) on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University, where he will be studying the role of ombudsmen and newspaper influence on public opinion in the 1920s.

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